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Mayor Cook outlines Westfield's coping efforts

Forging partnerships is among the ways Westfield is saving money, improving services and anticipating economic recovery

By Howard Smulevitz / Star correspondent

Posted: February 21, 2009

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Economic uncertainties are not keeping Westfield from improving its services and preparing for the eventual recovery, Mayor Andy Cook told the Westfield Chamber of Commerce on Thursday.

Forging partnerships with public and private groups is one step Cook said he is taking to make local government more responsive.

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"A lot of people are asking me, 'What is Westfield doing' " to cope, he said to an audience of about 165 people at the IMMI/Keynote Conference Center in downtown Westfield.

Cook said that during his first year as mayor in 2008, he saved \$2.9 million by garnering more than \$2.2 million in grants and cutting expenditures by \$688,000.

Part of the problem with planning for hard times is inevitable delays in

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budgeting, Cook said. For instance, preparation of the 2009 budget began early last year before the recession hit, and the state still hasn't approved that budget, he said, making it difficult to estimate how much revenue would be available.

The mayor said he has instructed city employees to focus on "accountability, integrity and innovation," and that the push to improve operations would continue.

While the city has not filled employment vacancies, Cook said, he has managed savings and better services from examining operations closely. He cited examples such as working with Noblesville to have that city handle Westfield traffic cases because Westfield doesn't have its own traffic court. He also said the city increased billings for emergency services, primarily ambulance runs, with a \$300,000 gain last year.

The mayor said the development staff's attention has shifted from dwindling rezoning projects to the effect of the U.S. 31 expressway project on businesses along the highway corridor -- especially those that would have to relocate.

Cook also pointed to a program of joint fuel purchasing and vehicle maintenance the city initiated with Westfield Washington Schools, as well as public-private partnerships aimed at downtown economic development, such as the Grand Junction Task Force study.

"You'll soon be hearing a lot about 'Westfield Cares,' " Cook said of one program being planned. It would coordinate social services to better identify and assist poor and elderly residents who are being overlooked.

Cook said after the meeting that he hasn't cut 2009 expenditures other than to keep vacant positions unfilled, and that he doesn't expect budget cuts unless he sees something that would force him to take action.

Cook also noted that he inherited a \$3 million deficit and that the city ended 2008 with a \$1.6 million cash balance.

"We didn't have to borrow money, and that's big these days," he said.

Former City Council member Mic Mead, who often has been a critic of the city administration, had only compliments for Cook after his speech.

Mead said the mayor's leadership is putting the city in a strong position to prosper when the economy improves and money for development becomes available.

The mayor also is keeping a tight lid on the budget, Mead said.

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